

WWJO? What Would Jesus Occupy?  
SERMON FOR Oct. 16, 2011  
Based on Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup>So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' <sup>21</sup>They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Today's passage is often used to justify the separation of church and state. The concept is a curious thing as it often plays out that it is really a separation of convenience; that is I want a separation of your church from my state, or stated another way, I want a separation of your justice claims from my political philosophy, or I want to compartmentalize and pick and choose and syncretize my faith and politics so I have all the moral authority I need to do what ever I want. While this passage is used this way it is not the underlying spiritual truth that Jesus is trying to get across to people.

To understand Jesus' point we need to understand that Jesus was anchored in his tradition. There is an over arching driving vision in our tradition. In the Christian faith is a vision of world history that all of creation is diverse but unified. All of creation is one, every creature is related and in community with all other creatures, living in harmony and security toward joy and well being of every other creature. In the Hebrew Scriptures this is pictured in different ways and it is carried on in the Christian scriptures ***as the vision is expressed that all persons are children of a single family, members of a single tribe, heirs of a single hope, and bearers of a single destiny. Our shared destiny is the care and management (stewardship) of all of God's creation.*** If we don't get this, then we will never get Jesus, and we will never get our own Covenant. This driving vision of our tradition is hard to capture in one word but the closest we can come to it is "Shalom".

(Possible reference Ezekiel passage below)

[ I will make with them a covenant of peace (Shalom) and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. <sup>26</sup>I will make them and the region around my hill a

blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. <sup>27</sup>The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. <sup>28</sup>They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. <sup>29</sup>I will provide for them splendid vegetation, so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. <sup>30</sup>They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. <sup>31</sup>You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture,\* and I am your God, says the Lord God.]

Now, let's zoom in a little bit more. Shalom is the destination and the Kingdom or Empire of God was the vehicle for getting there. A kingdom is a political entity for organizing and ordering our shared way of being together.

Let's zoom in a little bit more. The sharing of bread and wine at a loving and joyful table where everyone is welcomed was a hands on experience of what the Empire of God can do and what Shalom is like. This is where Jesus is coming from. This vision is what is being challenged all the time by the people in authority and power, and this is what is going on in today's reading.

The people posing the question about taxes intend to trap Jesus in a no win answer about faith and politics. They have already given up the hope and vision of Shalom and assume the brokenness of the world as a given. But Jesus has not given up on the vision of Shalom and reframes the issue. He calls people back to life's greatest possibilities with his question. The main point is not the conclusion "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give God what belongs to God". The main point of this story is in the question, "Whose image is on the coin?" They answered Caesar and so Jesus shrugs his shoulders and says, "OK, then give it back to him." But what if they had answered differently? What if they still maintained the vision of their faith and they lived the "oneness" and wholeness of Shalom? What if they really believed that everything belongs to God? Their answer may have been different. As one example for children's Sabbath they might have said, "I see the image of a child and therefore we will buy bread, and medicines, and education, and housing, and clothes."

Whose image is on the coin? This is the question posed by the Occupy Wall Street movement. Whose image is on the coin? Another way to ask it, "Whose image is on our economy?"

I do not want to come across as one who has completely swallowed the kool-aid of any political agenda; right or left. I have my views but when I stand in this pulpit I am most desirous of being pastor for all the people. So, I invite you to think with me on a deeper Jesus level about what is going on with the people in our streets.

The dominant message in our society has been that capitalism and the free market is the God ordained economic system. To question this system is to be a traitor and a heretic. Underlying capitalism is a view of human nature.

- We are competitive
- It is a natural way of being in the world and being in relationship with each other
- Survival of the economic fittest is a natural consequence of the “invisible hand” which may or not be a “divine hand”
- God made the world this way and therefore capitalism is ordained by God and therefore has the moral high ground over any other economic system

I want to acknowledge that capitalism has given us tremendous prosperity and has created tremendous wealth. Capitalism has given us many advancements in medicine, education, and the arts. I also want to acknowledge that the labor, women’s and child welfare movements, within the context of capitalism, has raised the standard of the quality of life for the most people than in any other time in human history.

It is true that capitalism and the idea of a “free market” emerged from a society with a Christian ethos but this is not the same as a biblical or godly prescribed model for how we order our shared economic life. As people of faith and spirit calling on the ideas of our tradition we are challenged to ask ourselves to what degree does capitalism move us in the direction of the coming age of Shalom, Peace, and Wholeness. It is with the “shalom faith lens” that we can evaluate and respond to the events around us as people of faith and spirit.

Our relationship with money and our relationship with those who have it and those who do not have it, says a great deal about us as individuals and as a community. The question of whose image is on the coin draws us into a deeper examination of ourselves and how we use money as an “exchange” between us. The definition of an “exchange” is “give something and get something” and this very much sounds like a relationship. The New York Stock Exchange could be understood as the New York Stock Relationship.

The message of the Occupy Wall Street Movement is that the relationship between the decision makers of our capitalist system and the majority of the people is skewed and out of balance to the point of causing suffering of people, greedy exploitation of our planet, and risking the future of the human species. Also, it would be easy to dismiss an isolated event far away in New York but we should remember that there are protests all over the world including about 1,000 citizens here in Phoenix. This morning's article in the AZ Republic reported that the skewed relationship is recognized by people all over the political spectrum and people are sick of it.

The question still stands, "Whose image is on our economy?" While it is true that we have a deep competitive nature, it is also true that as human beings we have a great capacity for compassion and empathy. I also call for a re-structuring of our economic system and such a re-structuring should include the better angels of our human nature. This is simply a rejection of uber-capitalism and a call for putting balance in our economic exchange relationship.

I want to lay all the cards on the table especially as a church dependant on the generosity of every friend and member. I do not want to bite the hand that feeds us. While many of us benefit from the generosity of others as they share from their abundance it is not enough for our society as a whole. The economic system as it is currently structured and allowed to run amok continues to push more people into poverty and more and more wealth into fewer and fewer hands. Let's be clear, benefits from the generosity of others is called charity, but restructuring the system for the sake of our children and their futures is called justice.

Objections to what is happening include ad hominem arguments about anarchists. They are sprinkled among the movement just as they insert themselves into every movement.

The protestors call out, "The banks got bailed out! We got sold out!"

One protestor twitted, "We Don't Want Welfare, We Want Jobs. We Don't Hate Business, We Want Fairness. We Don't Want Handouts, We Want Justice."

I am not hearing the anarchist hard line from the protestors but I am hearing, "to get out of poverty you gotta climb the ladder yourself, but there's got to be a ladder to climb."

My point is not to weigh the pros and cons of different economic systems. I already acknowledge the pros of capitalism.

My point is not to preach against a system or to preach in support of a movement. I am a great believer that searching for answers together is better than preaching a dogma for myself.

My point is that Shadow Rock is a safe place and a safe people for searching and speaking truth to power.

Whose image is defining our life?

